

Chapter 16

After Prohibition

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?
William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, Act II, Scene 3

*But the cheerful Spring came kindly on,
And show'rs began to fall;
John Barleycorn got up again,
And sore surpris'd them all.*

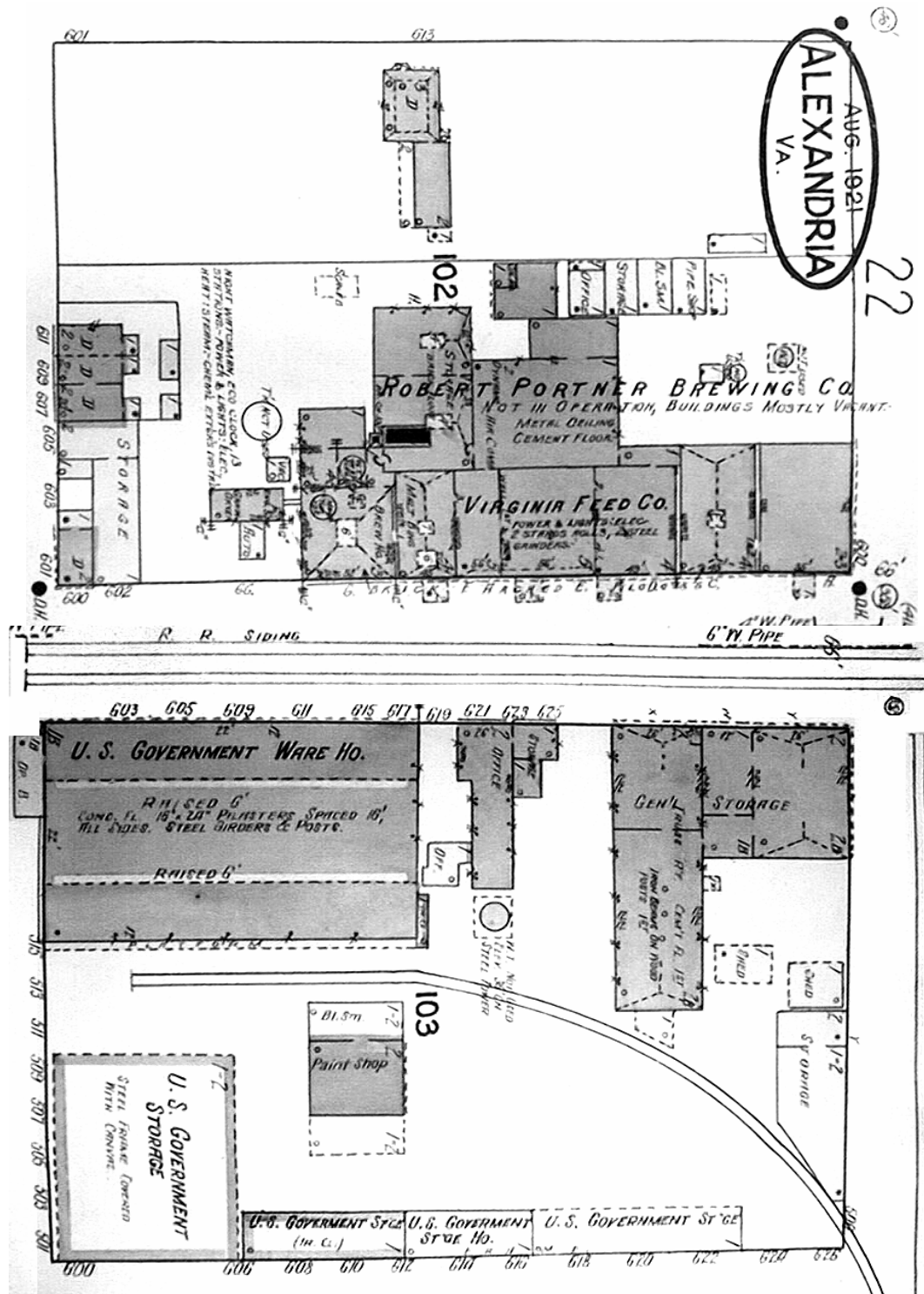
Robert Burns, John Barleycorn: A Ballad

The costs and challenges of enforcement and the unintended encouragement of criminality made many Americans question the virtues of Prohibition. Even more important, the onset of the nation's worst-ever depression rearranged national priorities. Perhaps there was nothing so bad after all about drowning a few sorrows in a social beer. And it was clear that the nation's shrinking economy could use the labor demand and huge tax revenues that the alcoholic beverage industry provided prior to 1920. In the 1932 election campaign, northern Democrats—of the party a half-century earlier derided as championing “Rum, Romanism and Rebellion”—supported the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. Already in 1926 Montana repealed its state Prohibition law. Several organizations, including the Moderation League, the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, and the Crusaders, formed in the 1920s to protest the organized crime and corruption stimulated by the national and state laws. In 1931 the American Legion voted to support a national referendum on the repeal of Prohibition. Alexandria native Ray Gallagher recalled the change in the national mood.

I remember one of [the “Drys”] telling me, shaking his finger in my face, back in 1930, 14 years after the state law went into effect, that “I'd never live to see the day that the 18th Amendment... would be repealed.” Shortly after the election of FDR in 1932, who ran on a platform of Repeal, among other things, I said to this fanatic, “Well, Mr. S., it doesn't look like I've got long to live... FDR is going to repeal the 18th Amendment, and you said I'd never [live to] see the day.” He turned livid, and quickly turned away. (Gallagher n.d.)

Congress passed the 21st Amendment in February 1933, even before Franklin Roosevelt took office, but only rolled back Prohibition gradually, first permitting the sale of beer with no more than 3.2 percent alcohol in states without their own anti-alcohol laws.

Prohibition was still a state and local issue, however, and its repeal required both state ratification of the 21st Amendment—achieved December 5—and the roll-back of state and local laws. Neither



Details of the 1921 Sanborn insurance atlas of Alexandria depicting most of the brewery complex. Many buildings were then occupied by the federal government; the rest, while owned by the Portners' Virginia Feed Company or the Robert Portner Corporation, were vacant.

posed much of a problem. Most of the public had lost faith or interest in the noble crusade. Several Alexandria restaurateurs were tried in 1933 for each possessing a case or two of beer, but they were acquitted by juries of their peers, presumably because their “3.2 beer” was generally not considered intoxicating and was already being widely sold in Washington. In 1933 the State of Virginia calculated that it was losing \$600,000 to \$1,000,000 a year in tax revenue by continuing to ban the sale of alcohol. Alexandria’s fines for violations of the liquor laws amounted to less than three fifths of the costs of arresting, jailing and prosecuting offenders. With the support of groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, the City Council repealed the local laws—still promising to prosecute under state laws, but with the state to collect fines and pay costs. (*Alexandria Gazette* June 27, 1933, June 28, 1933, June 14, 1933 and June 30, 1933; *Fairfax Herald* July 21, 1933)

By end of summer 1933 “Repeal” seemed assured, at least for the sale of beer. One-third of the states, including the most populous, had voted to repeal but were awaiting full national ratification. A Virginia referendum on the issue was slated for October. By early August, 782 Virginia retailers had secured federal licenses to sell 3.2 beer, although it was still unlawful actually to vend it. Nonetheless, beer was being widely and openly dispensed in Richmond, Virginia Beach and Charlottesville. Local Women’s Christian Temperance Union chapters fought a rearguard action to the end, petitioning against Repeal, even against the sale of beer or light wines, and taking the fight to the polls. (*Alexandria Gazette* July 6, 1933, August 8, 1933, July 11, 1933, June 14, 1933, August 14, 1933 and October 3, 1933)

On October 3, 1933 the Repeal forces took Virginia by a nearly two-to-one margin. Urban Alexandrians were five to one in favor. Voters did approve significant state controls over sales, including a direct role in distribution, and many counties retained local option. Two days later, the *Alexandria Gazette* published its first beer advertisement in seventeen years. The following day, grocery stores were stocked with the product. (*Alexandria Gazette* October 4, 1933, October 5, 1933 and October 6, 1933)

It was no wonder then that there was talk of reviving the Portner brewery. Negotiations for its sale began in February 1933 in anticipation of Repeal.

A movement for the reopening of the Robert Portner Brewing Company... [was] launched by the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, Inc. Officials of the trade body have conferred with L.P. Allwine, manager¹ of the Portner Realty Company on the matter. It is stated that there are several prospects in view and the Chamber of Commerce has been requested to confer with them with a view of getting the brewery in operation. (*Alexandria Gazette* June 30, 1933)

The plant had seen better days, however. By the late 1920s it was already “a hulking, red-brick ruin, with all of its windows out, and its vats and tubs exposed.” The buildings behind the brewery, including the old Portner house, were razed under the direction of the city’s fire chief in 1932. By

¹ Officially, Allwine was the corporation’s secretary. He led the Capital Construction Company after Portner’s sons died or withdrew from the firm. The company sold the Virginia Flats apartments in 1937 and the Portner Flats, its last holding, in 1944.

1934, plans to reopen the firm had fallen through.² In 1935 the management of the Corporation decided to demolish the main brewery buildings. Two years later the Robert Portner Corporation itself dissolved. (*Fairfax Herald* February 17, 1933 and April 24, 1936; *Alexandria Gazette* April 12, 1932, June 30, 1933 and April 26, 1935; Gallagher 1978:2; Alexandria Corporation Court Charter Book 3:27)



THIS BEER
 SHIPPED TO AND DISTRIBUTED BY
M. H. KENDRICK
 Wholesale Beer Distributor
 Phone Alex. 1329
 Jefferson Davis Highway
 POTOMAC, ALEXANDRIA, VA.
WHOLESALE BEER LICENSE NO. 168
 Issued by Virginia Alcoholic Beverage
 Control Board, April 11, 1934

The distributor must collect the Virginia State excise tax on this beer and transmit same to the State.

Immediately after Repeal, numerous private beer distribution firms superseded the old brewery-owned depot systems. Although strictly regulated by the state, they cooperated closely with their suppliers, striking deals on promotions and often agreeing to carry a brewery's products to the exclusion of its major competitors.

Despite being vacant since about 1920, the 1901 ice plant at the northeast corner of Saint Asaph and Wythe Streets still stood. It housed a laundry from about 1937 to 1950. The 1912 bottling house, after serving as storage for the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Exhibits, was

² Also rejected were plans for a slaughterhouse and a gas "by-product plant" on the site. U.S. Creamery, a manufacturer and purveyor of butter and chicken feed, nearly moved into a portion of the brewery in 1925. (*Alexandria Gazette* December 16, 1925 and April 8, 1927; *Washington Post* September 19, 1930)

remodeled as “Portner’s Arena,” the Washington area’s most important venue for boxing matches between late 1931 and 1933. About 1936, however, it became the Parkway Motor Company’s used-car showroom. Two years later, the “old” Portner Arena was a soundstage and production facility of the American Film Corporation. By 1940 it had again been transformed, this time into a skating rink. (Hill Directory Company 1924, 1932, 1934, 1936, 1938, and 1940; *Alexandria Gazette* May 4, 1938; *Washington Post* March 28, 1917, November 2, 1931 and June 23, 1934)

Toward the mid twentieth century, new construction began to obliterate most traces of the once great brewery. In 1941 the American Red Cross unveiled plans to erect a headquarters for its Eastern Division immediately north of the 1912 bottling house/warehouse/arena/studio/rink. The 1892 bottling house and other subsidiary buildings on the block were razed in preparation. The 1912 bottling house, however, was retained and incorporated as a wing for office space and storage. (Hill Directory Company 1951; *Alexandria Gazette* May 23, 1941)

After the Second World War, rapid suburbanization in the Washington area encouraged Woodward & Lothrop, the area’s largest department store chain, to scout new locations. The vacant block upon which the main brewery buildings once stood seemed a perfect place for an Alexandria branch store as it was immediately accessible to Washington Street, now a section of the Mount Vernon or George Washington Memorial Parkway. The parcel also offered ample parking area to serve an increasingly mobile and affluent public. With a little re-grading, the site permitted access to the building on two levels—at street grade on the Washington Street facade and through the basement from the parking lot at the rear (east side). “Woodies” remained until 1968, when the W.J. Sloane Company purchased the store in order to showcase its home furnishings. A similar chain, Mastercraft Interiors, succeeded Sloane’s in the early 1980s. (Hill Directory Company 1953, 1968, 1969 and 1980; Alexandria Building Permits 1928-1985)

An economic boom of the 1990s brought another wave of development that reshaped the neighborhood. The 1901 ice plant was partially demolished and then encapsulated within the “Riverport” office project. The Red Cross headquarters was razed to make way for a townhouse/condominium complex, “Portner’s Landing,” which retains the gutted 1912 bottling works, now adapted as residential space. Finally, in 1999-2000, the former site of the main Portner brewery buildings was redeveloped to contain a five-story office/commercial project occupying the entire block.

Nonetheless, physical evidence of Robert Portner’s influence remains, in addition to the extant brewery buildings, archaeological finds, and an extensive line of descendants. While his Alexandria and Washington homes are gone, his Manassas mansion remains, now the main block of a nursing home. There is also a Portner Avenue in Manassas. Portner Road, a street just north of Alexandria’s “Old Town,” takes its name from a formerly brewery-owned plot of land along a railroad line there. The Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Maryland, *alma mater* of several distaff Portner descendants, has an eponymous science laboratory. Portner Alley bisects public housing erected on the site of the demolished Portner Flats in Washington. Similarly, the Portner’s Landing condominium/townhouse development that incorporates the 1912 bottling house is served by an interior alley known as Tivoli Passage, in honor of the old brewery. These

new homes were featured in an HGTV segment in 1999. There was even an Alexandria restaurant named “Portner’s,” not for any direct connection to the man or brewery, but because a couple of beer bottles were unearthed on the site during the building’s renovation!



Above left: The "Riverport" office development at the northeast corner of Saint Asaph and Wythe Streets, Alexandria. The building contains the remnant of the 1901 Portner brewery icehouse, now expressed only in the piers visible on the side of the building.

Above right: The 1912 brewery bottling house, gutted and converted to condominium residences.

Right: Current photograph of the site of Robert Portner's Civil War-era brewery. The present commercial building was erected in 1930.

